

Frequently Asked Questions Administration of Oral Vaccines

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Who can prescribe the oral rotavirus vaccine?

Many of the health care providers licensed in Washington are authorized to prescribe and administer oral medications, including the rotavirus vaccine. These providers are physicians, physician assistants, osteopathic physicians, osteopathic physician assistants, and advanced registered nurse practitioners.

Can these providers also administer the oral rotavirus vaccine?

Yes. All of the health care providers with authority to prescribe can also administer the vaccine.

Can these providers delegate the administration of the oral rotavirus vaccine to other clinic personnel?

These providers can delegate the administration of the vaccine to other health care practitioners with a scope of practice that specifically allows the administration of oral medicine. Under Washington law, the administration of oral vaccinations can be delegated to registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, and nursing technologists (nursing students, if oral administration has been covered in their education and training).

Can providers delegate the administration of oral rotavirus to health care assistants?

No. There are strict limitations on the tasks health care assistants can perform. These limitations are set out in the law that created health care assistant license in 1984. That law only authorizes health care assistants to perform blood draws and certain injections. Since oral administration of medicine is not in the scope of practice for health care assistants, administration of the oral rotavirus vaccine can not be delegated to them.

What health care tasks can be delegated to a health care assistant?

The general rule is that health care tasks can only be delegated to another health provider the task falls within the scope of practice for that provider. For health care assistants, this means they may only perform blood draws and certain injections as delegated health care tasks.

My clinic uses medical assistants. How are they different than health care assistants?

We are aware of the training courses and examination that offer national certification as a "medical assistant." In Washington, however, we don't have a category of licensed health care provider called "medical assistants." This means there is no legally recognized scope of practice in our state for medical assistants. Someone with a medical assistant certification cannot lawfully perform any task that is the practice of medicine unless that person also holds a health profession license issued by the state. Unlicensed medical assistants should not be administering oral medications of any kind, including oral vaccines.

Many medical assistants use their training to obtain a health care assistant license. We support those efforts. A medical assistant who obtain a health care assistant license is still limited in Washington to those tasks within the health care assistant scope of practice.

Can a medical assistant hand the oral rotavirus vaccine to a parent who then gives it to a child?

No. Handing the vaccine to a parent is considered to be dispensing a medicine. Under Washington law, a health care practitioner can only dispense medicine if the practitioner is also allowed to prescribe the medicine. Health care assistants cannot “hand over” or dispense the oral rotavirus vaccine because they are not allowed to prescribe medicines.

Can naturopaths administer the oral rotavirus?

Yes. Immunizations are within the scope of practice for naturopaths.

Can the department override the current law and make it possible for possible for health care assistants to administer the oral rotavirus vaccine?

No. Since the scope of practice for health care assistants is set in statute, a change in the scope requires a change in the law. This requires action by the state legislature.

Does the law need to change so that health care assistants can administer oral vaccines?

Yes. In the meantime, we are, however, very concerned about this issue and would like to see the oral rotavirus vaccine fully implemented as soon as possible. We have met with the Washington State Medical Association and other groups who are willing to propose a change to the scope of practice for health care assistants during the 2008 legislative session. We will work closely with these groups and monitor the efforts with the goal of making sure patient safety is assured.

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